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ABSTRACT

The school reform movement which has accelerated over the last two years provides a point of departure for this discussion of where educators stand today in the battle to preserve and strengthen the public schools and of directions that need to be taken toward democratic school reform, particularly in the social studies. Much of the discussion is based on recommendations made in a recent report, "Equity and Excellence: Toward an Agenda for School Reform," which postulates that (1) considerable control has been lost over our own communities, including our schools, and (2) that many of our greatest human capacities are being wasted, with dire consequences for economic and social well-being. Curricular, pedagogical, and structural challenges in social studies education are discussed, followed by a call for greater collaboration and cooperation among communities, school and university faculties, and administrators in the form of democratic decision-making and shared responsibility. A final challenge is the need to improve the communication and exchange of information across networks, research and development centers, and the schools by building a grass roots information and resource network that serves the cause of democratic school reform. (LH)

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Democratic School Reform and the Social Studies

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Public Education Information Network

A Committee of Correspondence

A talk prepared for the annual meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium at Wingspread, Racine, Wisconsin, June 1985.

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The issues of American education are joined. There are two sharply divergent perspectives on what are the root problems, and what should be done. I won't spend much time on the first. You know it well. It calls itself the excellence or back to basics movement. Its manifesto is A Nation at Risk, its intellectual mentors are Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, Nathan Glazer, and a host of others. It certainly isn't a unitary point of view, but there is a convergence on several key points. It rests on a view of the past--that the liberal progressive solutions of the last thirty years or so have not only failed but are among the chief culprits in bringing on the current crisis, and that the push for equality, equality of opportunity and child-centered pedagogy have undermined the pursuit of excellence. Some call the position conservative, neoconservative or neoliberal. I think a more accurate description is restrictive and undemocratic. For whatever the intentions--and in many cases, I'm convinced they are good, put into practice it has accelerated top-down control of schools; led to an increasingly restrictive view of knowledge, learning, literacy, and the nature of human talents and capacities; and to abandonment of the commitment to public schools that educate all children.

The second position I'll call the equity and excellence position. It could also be called a democractic-progressive perspective. It is a position that is just beginning to be articulated by a broad coalition of educators, teachers, principals, child advocates, community leaders, and some of this nation's leading scholars and educators.

I focus not on the arguments and counter-arguments of the two positions and their variants. My concern is what is the political future of the newly emerging equity-excellence coalition and where we go from here. I speak not as a dispassionate outsider but as a committed

advocate. (I've never met a dispassionate outsider on the school issue.) When I say 'we', I mean all of us, as individual citizens in our community, and as professionals—teachers, scholars and administrators in the public schools, in universities, in government, foundations, professional associations, unions, and independent agencies (including the SSEC) who have been staunch defenders of the public schools over the years.

I should say at the outset that I can't answer this question. The task I take for myself today is modest. I'll begin with a few remarks about where I think we stand today in the battle to preserve and strengthen public schools, and about the direction we need to travel. I will conclude by raising a few of the difficult issues and problems I think we need to face as citizens and professionals committed to revitalizing the social studies, and citizenship education as part of the larger agenda to reform the nation's schools. Much of what I have to say is based on conversations, correspondence I have had, and reading I have done in conjunction with my work over the last three years helping to organize the Public Education Information Network, Committee of Correspondence, and to coordinate the writing of Equity and Excellence: Toward an Agenda for School Reform, a document several of you know and may have helped to draft.[1]

I. Where Are We?

We are nearing the end of the great school debate of the eighties. In my view we've won the first intellectual skirmish hands down. Not that it is over or will ever be over. But I think we've demonstrated that the chief advocates for the excellence movement have ignored or inadequately addressed many of the most significant questions—most blatantly the relationship of school to work, the cultural questions, the

nature of knowledge and learning in a changing world, the education of the poor, minorities and women. Two of the more recent reports demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that many of our children are at risk, and those who are most at risk remain untouched or stand to be harmed by an educational agenda that emphasizes intensified and more frequent testing for academic achievement, in effect raising the bar several notches higher while simultaneously reducing or eliminating support for community health, social and educational services for those who are least able to make the race. The evidence has been meticulously gathered and summarized, for anyone who cares to look, that shows the hard fought advances made by minorities completing secondary and post secondary education (particularly in the high status institutions) have leveled or have been reversed. We also have shown that there are alternative visions of what education is about, and there are no shortages of workable alternatives to consider in all areas from school and school system management, finance, curriculum, pedagogy, testing and evaluation, school community relations to teacher education and educational research. One of the more significant outcomes of the public debate that was set off by A Nation at Risk, is that we were pushed to get our act together. There's a way to go, but we have made our case well.[2]

What's happening at the level of practical policy, and in the schools is less encouraging. The current battle over the federal budget is ample evidence of the odds we face. The current Administration in the guise of budget stringency is proceeding with its plans to dismantle the 'public sector'. This means that not only a reduction of the federal commitment to education but eliminating, or freezing a wide variety of human services that are directly related to the capacity of the school to

fulfil its promise--childrens, youth, and family services, community health, student loans, job training, services for the handicapped, rehabilitation programs. Whatever happens at the federal level of course deeply effects the budget priorities at state and local levels. Although there are significant differences between and within states, virtually everywhere education must compete for scarce public dollars. The choice we are told by the current administration is not between guns and butter, but between butter and butter. Will Americans already grumbling over high taxes be willing to raise the average enough to make teaching attractive to the bright prospects we say we want? As things stand now in 1985 I doubt it. Rural and inner city schools most in need of outstanding teachers are hard pressed to pay the ones they already have[3]. The consequences of adding more math requirements and installing more state and local competency testing without increasing the pool of qualified math teachers and the capacity of districts to attract and keep them are not difficult to imagine. Forget about quality education (quality rarely comes cheaply in any area) with such frills as counselling and science equipment for everyone, when the roof is leaking, the windows need repair, and the number of students without a regularly assigned teacher is increasing yearly. But as serious as financial squeeze is the effect on morale of the current healthy crop of top down mandates and regulations that attempt to legislate excellence from the front office or the state capitol. It is our best teachers, principals and professionals who are leaving when they have other options.

There are many pieces could be added to this depressing story. But it's the up side that is my theme today. What are the reasons for optimism? First, as many of know from experience, there are classrooms, schools and districts that foster equity and excellence in many cities

and areas of this country. They are not aberrations. If you look you can find them almost anywhere. Several books and studies have documented what I and many of you know first-hand--that there is a lot of good practice and many creative and dedicated people who teach and work in the schools. In many places teachers, principals have created schools that respect the dignity and worth of each individual; teach students to read, write, think, help them to pursue their career interests; and to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens. Second there's a lot of first-rate research and development and work that has gone on over the last decade and is continuing. In my travels for the Network I found that the search for alternatives in pedagogy, curriculum testing, educational technology and other areas is alive and well, here and in Britain. As many of you know there has been a small renaissance in educational studies over the last decade in a number of areas, curriculum and pedagogical studies, language learning, cultural and historical studies, child development and educational policy analysis policy. Finally, in spite of the counterpressures there is a resurgence of interest in creating and expanding programs and schools that give teachers, principals and parents greater autonomy and responsibility.

II. The Direction of Change

I borrow from what I think is the best summary of the equity-excellence perspective: it is an edited from a talk delivered by Paul Weckstein, director of the Center of Law and Education, at the press conference in February in Washington announcing the publication of Equity and Excellence: Toward an Agenda for School Reform, a collaboratively written statement endorsed by almost 200 writers, educational researchers, teachers and administrators.

" The school reform movement which has accelerated over the last two years has captured the public imagination because it responds to two widely held, interconnected, and largely accurate perceptions—first, that we have lost considerable control over our own communities, including our schools, and, second, that much of our greatest human capacities is being wasted, with dire consequences for our economic and social well-being.

This report is a needed antidote to the bulk of commission reports on education because it takes far more seriously the democratic values which underly those public perceptions. The contrast with those other reports is striking:

Instead of assuming that our schools are primarily to blame for declining economic productivity, this report recognizes that we have allowed our workplaces and economic institutions to be organized in ways that fail to provide any productive role for many and then fail to utilize the full capacities of most of those who are employed. Thus, in addition, to noting that "democratic schools are essential to a democratic nation," the report emphasizes that a vision of a more democratic nation, economically as well as politically, is essential to creating more democratic schools. A nation "where people share economic and political power at all levels, ... there is full and fair employment, [and] persons have greater control over their work lives" would not only be more productive in economic terns, it would also create a much stronger demand for our schools to provide high quality education for all students to develop the skills and talents needed by such a society. The waste of our children's potential in our nation's schools is tolerated only because we persist in maintaining employment structures which are

wasteful in not bringing to bear the full creative powers of all our people in addressing unmet community needs.

Instead of assuming that prior commitments to equity are the cause of lowered standards, this perspective rests on the democratic principle that our excellence as a nation depends upon a commitment to the full inclusion of everyone, and that the capacity for excellence is not predominant in any one class, race, or sex. Thus, this report starts with the assumption that the basic curriculum goals in the report—including the capacity to read and write critically and to apply knowledge to one's own life and the problems of one's community—are appropriate and feasible for all, and then goes on to raise the difficult questions we must address as citizens and professionals, of how to set standards, how to develop pedagogy, how to provide adequate resources, and how to assess performance to assure that those goals are achieved by students--and who should be making those decisions.

Instead of assuming that the problems facing schools should be blamed on the home background of the children in them, this report rests on the democratic principles that our nation draws strength from its cultural diversity and that public institutions are created to serve the public. Thus, it calls for teachers to understand, to prize, and to utilize the history and culture of the students' community.

Instead of assuming that we can improve educational quality by adopting teacher-proof curricula and imposing rigid uniformity as a means of teacher control, this report rests on the democratic principle that our institutions are strengthened by drawing upon the ideas and creativity of the people who work within them. This implies greater teacher involvement in curriculum development and more free time for

teachers to spend with students, parents, and other teachers, and with their own study.

Instead of assuming that individual rights are a "zero-sum" game in which students gain rights only at teachers' expense, this report rests on the democratic principle that everyone gains when all citizens have the will and the knowledge to exercise their rights, and that everyone suffers when some are silenced or excluded through a denial of rights. Thus, the report calls for modes of collaboration and decision-making which provide greater rights to both students and teachers and which allow teachers greater freedom to teach by allowing students greater freedom to learn; we know that the school administrations which systematically abridge students' rights are also usually the most disrespectful of teachers.

Instead of assuming that discipline problems are primarily the result of the rights of the obedient many being sacrificed to the rights of the disruptive few, we hold to the democratic principles that legitimate order in schools as in the society can endure only if it respects individual rights. The real enemy is neither our desire for community nor of reliance on individual rights but rather those anti-democratic tendencies in schools which undermine both strong community and strong individuals. The direction we must have is curricular pedagogy and governance which foster greater student engagement, responsibility, and self-governance.

Finally, instead of assuming that all bureaucratic evil flows from the federal government, this perspective reflects the traditional and healthy American suspicion of all bureaucracies, including those that are built at the local and state level. Thus, the report emphasizes the need for an affirmative federal and state role as well as significant transfer

of authority from the central administration to individual schools and in turn to the teachers, students, and parents themselves, consistent with the need for uniform protection of individual rights and non-discriminatory treatment[4].

III. The Challenges

We've still a long way to go. There are a great many difficult intellectual, political and practical challenges before us if we are to convince a skeptical public that equity and excellence are not contradictory, but interdependent and realizable. We've learned a great deal over the last decade. We have a fuller grasp of the complexities and problems, gained a greater respect for the limits and the potential of schooling. We have shown that we can and do have schools that promote equity and excellence when there is the will, adequate resources, adminstrative flexibility, support and involvement of parents and community, encouragement by the central office and state and local officials, and, of course, a competent and dedicated teaching staff with effective school leadership. But whether the promise will be realized over the long haul depends upon the willingness and capacity to make the necessary curricular, structural, and legislative changes. What are some of the long term challenges?

Curriculum

The basic conceptions that underlie the existing academic curriculum in the social studies and other basic subjects have not changed appreciably over the last fifty years. The "new social studies", "the new new" math, innovation in the teaching of language and literature and the sciences did not penetrate very deeply, or significantly alter the curriculum organization, content, or pedagogy. If anything, there has been a reversion in the social studies and the entire academic curriculum

to a curriculum of one damn thing after another and a pedagogy that emphasizes, to quote Mark Twain, "regurgitating petrified opinion." I do not want to minimize the exceptions nor the good work that has been done and continues in such areas as multi-cultural, global and community education. But virtually everywhere we are confronted with course requirements, textbook adoption policies, forms of departmentalization and school and school system decision-making, and centralized testing that make reconceptualization, reorganization and integration of the curriculum extremely difficult.

What I'm talking about here are not ways of making additional connections between the American History and American Lit courses, or revitalizing the social studies-English core in the middle grades, or efforts to integrate multi-cultural, women's studies, popular culture, media studies, peace and global education into the existing academic curriculum (though I heartily applaud such changes). I mean a more basic examination and consideration of alternatives. This requires a rethinking of all the categories, and assumptions, the very language we use to talk about curriculum and teaching, knowledge, culture, and learning.

We do not start from ground zero in such an effort. Over the last fifteen years, there has been a blossoming of work in several areas. The scope and direction of this work in North America and in Britain cannot be summarized here. I would however like to mention only two, the efforts to examine the nature and meaning of culture, and work in the study of the nature and acquisition of language and human communication. In England scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham have explored and greatly expanded our understanding of popular culture, youth culture, working class culture,

multiculturalism, and how they relate to politics and power. Researchers writing from critical, anthropological, sociology of knowledge, feminist, phenomenological and semiotic perspectives raise profound questions about the ways knowledge and learning have become defined in the society generally, and in universities and schools. Their work is more than a critique, it suggests new ways of thinking about curriculum as a whole, and alternative ways of conceptualizing particular school subjects, the social, biological and physical sciences, history, language, literature and the fine and practical arts. There is also a danger in all this intellectual activity of "theoreticism", that is of theorizing and research being divorced from practice, removed from the everyday concerns of teachers, administrators, parents, and the realities of schools. I will come back to this problem later.

Work and the Curriculum

We can no longer assume that good education will lead to a good job. In order to pull together a strategy for educational reform, we have to address the nature and prospects of work, worklessness, leisure, and the continuing learning need of adults. The jobs that are increasing most rapidly and are projected for the vast majority of Americans require few high level skills and minimal education. And as Gabriel Chanan points out, "Leisure only has meaning in relation to work. If you have no work you have no leisure either (nor do you have the money to use leisure facilities)."

School is simultaneously an alternative to employment and preparation for employment. As preparation for employment, school acts as a prescriber of employment and unemployment. An educational strategy therefore cannot ignore what future mix of employment and unemployment to anticipate, and the nature of the paid work that will be available.

The future pattern of employment could take one of three directions: (1) a return to the growth economy of the 50's and 60's generating close to full employment; (2) an accentuation of the differences between the employed and un- or underemployed or; (3) sharing of employment and unemployment. `1' is unlikely, `2' is undesirable and socially explosive; `3' is the most preferable option. It implies an increase of work in the home and the community, a greater integration of work and leisure for everyone; and perhaps an increase of time spent on education.

I'm not sure whether this is correct, but whatever the future, it will differ sharply from the nineteenth century conception that underlies the present school and curricular structure. Among the skills Channan suggests may be most needed in the uncertain years ahead are: diagnosing community needs and identifying worthwhile or profitable tasks (whether through cash transaction or direct value; getting the most of local facilities and amenities; structuring time; sustaining relatinoships; creating cooperative groups; negotiating with resource holders; influencing the delivery of local services; and participating in public decision-making.[5]

My point is not whether this particular set is adequate, but what this line of analysis suggests about the general direction of curricular and pedagogical change. The separations between liberal or general education and vocational or career education; between basic academic courses, and work study and community education are put into question. If these high level skills are as vital and demanding as those required for academic study, as they are, then they need to be incorporated into mainstream education and given the status of "basics". Many curriculum areas and school activities that have been marginalized by budget stringency and the push to define the basics in the narrowest terms must

become central to our reform efforts--the performing arts, work-study, citizenship education, physical education, community and environmental studies. And the schools' working definition of the 'social studies' as history with a side order of social science cannot be sustained on intellectual or practical grounds.

Pedagogy

The curriculum questions as we all know cannot be separated from the pedagogical ones. Yet discussion of pedagogical problems and what needs to be done to solve them has received scant attention in the public debate. I've deliberately chosen the term pedagogy rather than teaching methods. By pedagogy I mean both an articulated point of view and set of commitments about society, culture, and human learning; and the knowledge and skills to realize these in practice—working with students individually and in groups. Pedagogy represents a unity of theory and practice, of the desirable with the possible. It is a term that has almost disappeared from the lexicon in American education. We do not require courses in pedagogy for a teaching credential; rather we specify separate courses in social foundations, psychology, philosophy, psychology, and curriculum and methods taught by specialists in these areas. Pedagogy is not a combination of these, but a tradition of inquiry in its own right with giants of its own as Pestalozzi, Susan Issacs, Montessori, Dienes, Friere. It is a discipline and an area of practical inquiry that cuts across several academic and applied fields. It cannot, as it has in many places, be reduced to applied social, developmental, educational or social psychology.

Most important, I think, is that pedagogy is the province of teachers. Many of our most proficient experts in pedagogy are teachers not university researchers or professors of curriculum and instruction.

I do not minimize the contribution the latter make. But the widely held impression by teachers and the public that scholarly study of education is detached from reality and is of little use is grounded in their personal experience. I have visited schools and schools systems in several parts of the country that are literally surrounded by universities and colleges, and was told that except for the student teacher supervisor, they have virtually no contact with university researchers and professors of education.

It is not merely lack of will and commitment. The reasons are complex. (Among others is a consequence of the way departments and schools of educaiton are structured and a reward system that favors inquiry tied to an established academic or educational specialization.) Whatever the reasons, this lack of continuous, direct involvement in schools and classrooms is a problem that will need to be addressed if the curricular and pedagogical questions are to be resolved collaboratively by teachers, administrators, and university-based researchers.

Collaborative Inquiry and Democratic Decision-making

The curricular, pedagogical, and structural questions can only be solved at the grassroots by those most deeply affected and who are most responsible and accountable for putting policies into practice. I want also to be careful to note that I am not saying that there is not a significant role to be played by the central office, the state and federal governments, and local officials. There has been too much mindless bashing of government bureaucracy and regulations. The U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies, and local districts and school boards have significant roles to play in educational planning, and in carrying out legislative and judicial mandates. The problem is not inefficient and callous bureaucracy but a centralized decision-making

structure that often frustrates rather than encourages initiatives by principals, teachers and school-support staff, and participation by community, parents, and students.

There is nothing original in calls for greater collaboration and cooperation among communities, school and university faculties and administrators. It's an old and good idea, and there continue to be many successful efforts in this direction. But if continuing collaboration is to be the rule rather than the exception, then many taken-for-granted habits of mind and administrative practices and existing regulations will need to be examined and changed at all levels. Collaboration implies democratic decision-making and shared responsibility. This will not come easily to institutions that are accustomed to hierarchy, and centralized authority. If we know anything about organizations, it is that those who hold power want to keep, not share it. More grassroots involvement will not develop on its own, but out of the efforts of those who are committed to equity and excellence and who are ready to work to develop a broad coalition of support among parents, teachers, educational professionals and researchers.

Networking, a Requisite for Democratic Reforms

The growth of this nascent coalition into a politically effective movement with a broad base of support in communities across this nation is a long term process. I think its success is tied to development of an effective political movement that is prepared to defend the public sector more generally, including public education, and to offer an affirmative agenda and strategy for democratic reform of our political and economic institutions. Whatever happens in the near future in the larger political arena, I believe that there a number of steps that we as educators and teachers can take now in order to support and expand

existing efforts to deal with the curricular pedagogical and structural issues, and to create a climate of opinion that supports investment in public education.

Among them is the need to develop more effective ways of sharing information and experience. I said earlier that in my recent travels on behalf of the Committee of Correspondence that I was impressed with the diversity and vitality of the work going on in this country and in Britain. I found that many of the individuals engaged in this work are linked to active informal and organized networks and associations.[6] The communication and exchange of information across networks, research and development centers and the schools is poor. It is a problem and a challenge I hope we will address. In my role as secretary of the Public Information Network I like to invite the SSEC as an organization and you as individuals to join in the discussion and in the effort to build a grass roots information and resource network that serves the cause of democratic school reform.

[1]I want to acknowledge my debt to the following: Fred Newman, Cleo Cherryholmes, Jeannie Oakes, Gabriel Channan, Colin Fletcher, Harold Rosen, Herb Kohl, Beatrice Gross for many of the ideas in this paper.

[2]Beatrice and Ronald Gross's new book, The Great School Debate (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985) which is a compendium of the issues and major arguments, counterarguments, and proposals, from a wide spectrum of political perspectives demonstrates how well this has been done.

[3]William Raspberry, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 30 April 1985.

[4]Paul Weckstein, On Equity and Excellence: Toward an Agenda for School Reform. February 6, 1985.

[5]This section relies on Gabriel Channan's "School to Work", News & Notes, Public Education Network, Jan.-Feb. 1985.

[6]The extent of the involvement surprised me. I only have information on 80 of several hundred Correspondents. They are active in 25 separate networks most of which were unknown to me.